



The silver bullet train

High-speed rail would solve the state's most pressing environmental and transportation problems. So why isn't Schwarzenegger supporting it?

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There aren't many easy answers to the environmental crisis facing California, a state with a fossil fuel-dependent culture that's cooking the planet, congesting the freeways and airports, and hastening a tumultuous end to the oil age. But there is one: build a high-speed rail system as soon as possible.

All the project studies indicate this should be a no-brainer. San Franciscans could travel to Los Angeles in just a couple hours, the same time it takes to fly, at a fraction of the cost. And the system — eventually stretching from Sacramento to San Diego — would generate twice as much money by 2030 as it costs to build. The trains use far less power than planes or cars and can be powered by renewable resources with no emissions. The system would get more than two million cars off the road and single-handedly reduce greenhouse gas emissions by as much as 12 million metric tons per year.

High-speed rail is a proven green technology that works well everywhere it's been implemented, including most of Europe and Asia. In France the TGV line from Paris to Lyon connects the country's two most culturally important cities in the same way that Los Angeles would be linked to San Francisco — from one downtown core to the other — allowing for easy day trips and ecofriendly weekend jaunts. Advocates for high-speed rail say it's an essential component of California going green and the only realistic way to meet the ambitious climate change targets approved last year in Assembly Bill 32.

Yet for some strange reason, the idea of high-speed rail has barely clung to life since San Franciscan Quentin Kopp first proposed it more than a decade ago as a member of the State Senate and set the studies in motion, all of which have found the project feasible and beneficial. Today Kopp, a retired judge, chairs the California High-Speed Rail Authority (CHSRA), which has fought mightily to move the project forward despite severe underfunding and sometimes faltering political support.

Growing awareness of climate change has increased support for high-speed rail among legislators and in public opinion polls (among Democrats and Republicans), leaving only one major impediment to getting energy-efficient trains traveling the state at 220 mph: Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

While posing for the April 16 cover of *Newsweek* with the headline "Save the Planet — or Else" and touting himself around the world as an environmental leader, Schwarzenegger has quietly sought to kill — or at least delay beyond his term — high-speed rail.

The \$10 billion bond issue to build the LA-to-SF section was originally slated for 2004, then pushed back to 2006, then pushed back to 2008 because Schwarzenegger worried it would hinder the \$20 billion transportation bond, Proposition 1B, which was focused mostly on new freeway construction.

Part of the deal to delay the train bond involved giving the CHSRA the money it needed to start ramping up the project, which included \$14.3 million last year, the most it has ever received. But rather than give the authority the \$103 million that it needs this year to honor contracts, set the final Bay Area alignment, start buying rights-of-way, and complete the engineering work and financing plan, the governor's budget proposed offering the agency just \$1.3 million — only about enough to keep the lights on and not fire its 3 1/2 staffers.

And now Schwarzenegger is asking the legislature to once again delay the 2008 bond measure, which would take a two-thirds vote of both houses. "Investing in it now would prevent us from doing bonds for any other purposes," the governor's spokesperson, Sabrina Lockhart, told us, citing prisons, schools, and roads as some other priorities for the governor. "It's not cost-effective in the short term."

The stand baffles environmentalists and other high-speed rail supporters, who say the project is expensive but extremely cost-effective over the long term (although it gets less so the longer the state delays, with about \$2 billion tacked on the price tag for every year of delay).

"If the governor would get up on his bully pulpit and talk about high-speed rail to the California people, we would be starting construction in 2009," Kopp told the *Guardian*. "What you have is political fear instead of political will."

Asked why Schwarzenegger doesn't seem to understand the importance of this issue — or how it relates to his green claims — CHSRA executive director Mehdi Morshed can only guess. Some of it is the daunting price tag and long construction schedule, some of it is that the governor tends to defer to the Department of Transportation for his transportation priorities, "and they're in the business of building more roads, so that's what they say we need."

But mostly, it's a failure to understand the kind of transportation gridlock that's headed California's way if we do nothing. "It's an alternative to meeting the travel demand with more highways and airport expansions," Carli Paine, transportation program director with the Transportation and Land Use Coalition, told us. But as Morshed told us, "The governor doesn't suffer much on the freeways, and he has his own plane."

The person doing Schwarzenegger's dirty work on high-speed rail is David Crane, an attorney turned venture capitalist who, although he's a Democrat from San Francisco, is one of the governor's top economic advisers and his newest appointee to the CHSRA board. Despite thick stacks of detailed studies on the project, Crane seems to want to return the project to square one.

"There's never been a comprehensive plan for how you're going to finance this thing," Crane told us, noting that the LA-SF link is likely to cost far more than the bonds would generate. "The bond itself is a red herring. You could raise the \$10 billion now and still not have a high-speed rail."

Yet supporters of high-speed see the Schwarzenegger-Crane gambit as mostly just a stall tactic. While Crane argues that the private sector funding — which could account for about half his estimated \$40 billion in total project costs (other documents say around \$26 billion) — needs to be nailed down first, supporters say California must firmly commit to the project if it's going to happen.

"Private capital won't be interested unless they know there is a public commitment," Kopp told us.

"You need to take a leap of leadership. When there is something that makes sense in so many ways, you need to have that initial public buy-in," said Bill Allayaud, legislative director for the Sierra Club California.

Support for that stance also seems to be strong in the legislature, where San Francisco's newest representative, Assemblymember Fiona Ma, has emerged as the point person on the issue. She even went on a fact-finding mission in France, aboard the TGV train when it reached 357 mph to break the world rail speed record.

"We can't do it until we have that public investment," Ma told us, noting that holding detailed financial debates right now is a diversion considering that "this project will pay for itself."

"My assembly caucus is extremely positive about high-speed rail. Right now it's on the ballot for next year, and I think it's going to stay there," Ma said. She isn't sure that she can get the CHSRA the full \$103 million it wants this year, "but whatever we can come up with is going to be better than \$1 million."

"The governor needs to get on board. This is an important environmental issue," Ma told us. "For him not to be behind it doesn't make sense."

Californians also seem to have a hard time fully understanding the project, probably because polls show that only about 10 percent of them have ever used high-speed rail in another country. Yet polls show climate change is a top public concern among Democrats and Republicans.

"Number one, the dollar figure is daunting," Kopp said. "Number two, we're Americans, and we just haven't experienced it."

Yet when the project and its benefits are explained, it doesn't seem to have any opponents outside the Schwarzenegger administration. Morshed said not even Big Oil and Big Auto — two deep-pocketed entities with a history of fighting large-scale transit projects — have opposed high-speed rail. Once people get it, everyone seems to love it.

"The reaction you get almost every time is 'Why aren't we building it?' That's the thing that is universal, people saying, 'Why don't we have this? What's wrong with us?' " Morshed said.

For such a massive project — with construction spanning almost the entire state — it's notable that none of the state's major environmental groups have challenged the project's environmental impact reports, which were certified in November 2005. That's largely because the route uses existing transportation corridors and has stops only in urban areas, thus not encouraging sprawl.

"Environmental groups generally don't like big projects, but they like this one," the Sierra Club's Allayaud told us. "There aren't a lot of negatives that we're having to balance out, and there are a lot of positives."

Yet politics being what it is, other obstacles are likely to present themselves. The CHSRA is now setting the route into the Bay Area, either through the Altamont Pass or the Pacheco Pass, both of which have political and environmental concerns.

Morshed — an engineer who served as consultant to the Senate Transportation Committee for 20 years before heading the CHSRA — expressed confidence that the project will happen if the state's leaders support it: "It's moving ahead, and we have very good support in the legislature. The only soft spot is the governor, who wants to postpone it and seems to have other priorities." *

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